Harm Reduction as a Policy Analytic Framework

Presentation to IOM Committee

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Simple Analytics

- Total Harm = Use * Average Harm = Prevalence * Intensity* Harmfulness

- Harm reduction useful concept when:
  - Harmfulness reduces prevalence, intensity
  - Harmfulness can be manipulated

- Trivial when harm and use unrelated
  - e.g. mandatory seat belt use in planes

- Goal; minimize total harm

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Other concepts of HR widely used

- **Micro-harm reduction**
  - any action that reduces harmfulness
  - e.g., automobile controls that prevent ignition without breathalyzer test

- **Any goal other than abstinence**
  - British "sensible drinking" quantity limits?

U.S. Drug Policy: Use Reduction
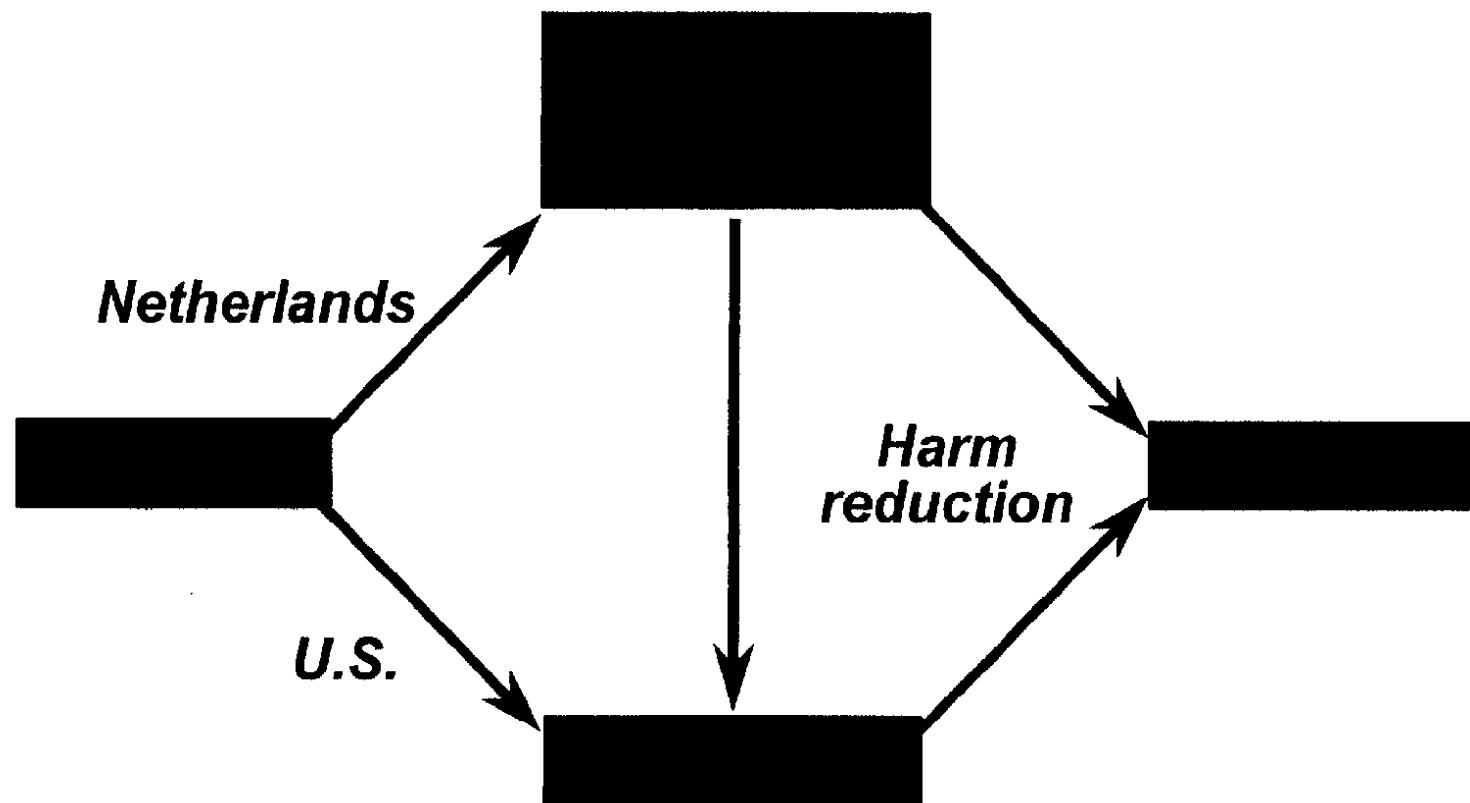

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Dutch Drug Policy: Harm Reduction

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Goal Should Be to Integrate Harm and Use Reduction

Netherlands

U.S.

Harm
reduction

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Harm reduction provides a goal, not a policy

- Tough rules may be harm minimizing
- Hawks emphasize use as a harm itself
  - reformers give minimal role to use
- Other normative issues play a role
  - Harm reduction may be only one goal

Harm reduction widely used, rarely articulated

- Mandatory air bags, seat belts
    - faster driving, more accidents but total damage lowered
- Explicit for alcohol
    - controlled drinking controversy
- Most prominent applications in drug policy
    - e.g. needle exchange, heroin maintenance
- How to balance trade-offs over time and across parties?

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How can harmfulness can be reduced?

- Product characteristics
  - potency, size of containers (e.g. 40 oz. beer cans)

- Conditions of access
  - alcohol store operating hours

- Conditions of use
  - safe injecting rooms

- Information campaigns
  - safe drinking practices

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What harm is being reduced?

- Many kinds of potential harms
  - health
  - crime
  - social functioning
  - civility
- Difficult to monetize or aggregate
- Frequently trade-offs among different types
  - Repeal reduced crime, increased health problems

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Harm to whom?

- Social welfare a strained concept

  - not clear whom to include or how to weight their interests

- Heterogeneity of effects

  - health effects borne primarily by user

  - crime effects primarily by others

- Difference between assumption and imposition of risk

  - should harms to users be given a lesser weight?

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Many applications in alcohol control

- Early morning opening of Bowery liquor stores

    - intended to reduce consumption of more dangerous substitutes

    - may increase local disorder

- Non-shattering containers in bars

    - makes fights safer, perhaps generating more

    - any effect on drinking?

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Empirical Objections to Harm Reduction

- Interventions rarely achieve their aim
  - homeostasis or worse

- Evaluations often weak
  - hard to detect long-term effects
  - e.g. initiation response may have long lag

- Clearer theoretical base to use reduction
  - unless use reduction increases harmfulness

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Normative Objections to Harm Reduction

- **"Sends the wrong signal"**
  - society benefits from clarity of laws
- **HR frequently involves normative conflicts**
  - e.g. condom distribution in prisons or schools contradicts sexual abstinence message
- **No evidence useful**
  - many adverse effects very distant from intervention

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When is harm reduction a useful framework?

- Few types of adverse consequences

- Distribution of harms not concentrated

- Underlying activity not morally controversial

- Seems relevant to tobacco

  - Less variegated harms

  - Policy itself not a source of harms

  - Nicotine consumption itself not yet stigmatized